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OF THE UNITARIAN SOCIETY.

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THE Rev. J. C. Street begs to acknowledge receipt of the following amounts in aid of the gratuitous publication of the *Chronicle and Index*:—

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Further contributions are needed and will be gladly acknowledged

It is with a sense of disappointment and regret that we announce the failure of the well-meant efforts of the Committee of the British and Foreign Unitarian Association to bring about a conference between the two Unitarian Societies of Belfast, with a view to their union, and the restoration of harmonious relations. Our own Society promptly and gladly responded to the appeal, and expressed its readiness to co-operate with the British and Foreign Unitarian Association, but the Ulster Society rejected the overtures that were made. So the present division is to be perpetuated, and nothing is to be allowed to be done to put an end to a deplorable scandal. We can do no more than renew the expression of our profound regret.

THE Rev. English Crookes has resigned his position as minister of the Second Congregation, Ballyclare. We regret to hear of his resignation, but should bear the disappointment more readily if we could hear that the two congregations in that small town had become reunited. Is there any hope of this?

At the Soiree and Church Meeting at Moneyrea, the Report presented revealed a condition of things more than usually encouraging. After praise and prayer, the Rev. G. W.

Bannister delivered his annual address. He reminded them that they met there as the members of a Christian Church, to engage in brotherly conference on whatever might promote their temporal or spiritual well-being as a religious community. It was well at such a time to call to mind those unseen spiritual ties that bound their hearts in one. High and noble were the aims they professed to have in view. But were they sufficiently impressed with them? Had they a clear conception of them? Did they keep them constantly in view, and follow after them and labour towards them, with that zeal and fervour which such high aims ought to inspire. A Church was not a political institution. As individuals, or as members of other societies, they were bound to use their personal influence for the redress of every social wrong. But as a Church they had other, higher, and more far-reaching aims, and to turn aside from these was to work spiritual damage which it might take years to undo. The Report would show that financial progress had been made during the year. But though no Church could hope to prosecute successfully its higher aims, unless its financial position was a sound and honest one, yet it was not the final end of a Church to be a commercial success. There must be this and something more. A Church was a religious institution. For religious purposes it rose into existence; for religious purposes it received support—that it might quicken and nurture the religious Godward instincts of every soul, and bring the whole of life beneath their hallowing and uplifting influence. The religious life of a Church could never rise above the aggregate of the religious life of the individuals who composed

it; and then only would they attain the high end of their existence as a Church, when their associating together, and their fellowship with one another in a common worship, served to kindle and sustain that Divine flame on the altar of their hearts. In the Report there were two features of a cheering kind. First, it showed that the annual income of the Church, which for a number of years had fallen considerably below the expenditure, had now risen to a level with it. At the same time good progress had been made in liquidating the debt incurred by the restoration of the meeting house. Early in the year the ladies resolved to raise, by a sale of work, a sum which would leave a remainder of £100 to be raised by the minister and committee. Towards this object the First and Second Congregations, Belfast, and other churches have rendered generous assistance; and should the ladies now receive, as they hope to do, some little help from Unitarian friends in England, towards their sale of work to be held on September 27th, there is every reason to hope that the end of the year will see the Church out of debt, and its annual income sufficient for all purposes.

HOW I LEFT ORTHODOXY.

"MY HOME SURROUNDINGS AND EARLY TEACHINGS!
MY REVOLT AGAINST PREDESTINATION.

BY JAMES C. STREET.

No. 1.

"He went out, not knowing whither he went."—HEBREWS xi. 8.

It is not always pleasant and easy to speak of oneself. Self-knowledge, which is the highest, is also the most difficult of attainment; but the making of oneself known to others, even to those closest and dearest to us, is at once the most delicate and difficult of tasks. And yet it is by knowing ourselves, and the working of our own minds and hearts, that we can best understand the history of mankind, and trace the course of the world's thought and life. So, however difficult and trying it might be to trace back to their source the springs which have nourished our own lives, and however distressing it may be to tell the

secrets of the soul's inner life, it sometimes becomes an imperative duty, from which a true man ought not to shrink. Especially is this the case with any man who has been called into a position of religious prominence, and whose utterances are waited for by hundreds of men and women who are daily trying to feel their own way along the dim and perilous deeps of life and thought. They naturally turn to him and say—"You are preaching to us a new and startling gospel; it is full of gladsomeness and inspiration, and it thrills our souls with new longings and hopes, but tell us how you got it, by what stages of growth it attained its present elevation, and by what warrant you speak its wondrous message to us." To such an appeal, a true man must respond. He may not like the heart-searching which it entails, nor the utterance in public that which has hitherto been the secret of his life; but he must speak, or fail to respond to demands which he himself has called forth.

It seems to me that such an appeal is made to me. For many years past I have stood forth as one who has broken with the current teachings of the day; who has resolutely turned aside from old dogmas and associations; who has taken a new course, and fearlessly sailed out into God's limitless ocean, fearing neither hidden rocks, nor boisterous winds, nor frowning skies. Many have followed my course; some boldly, and without the shadow of a fear, facing the eternal realities with brave hearts and serene consciences; and some with timid natures, afar off, but with straining eyes and yearning hearts, wondering what new shores shall be reached when the stormy seas are passed. Many have come to me from other communities and taken their position by my side; many more have shown their sympathy with my aims and hopes who have not ventured to break with the past and snap their old associations; while a considerable number come to me from time to time, hear my words, ponder the path of my going, and then, with irresolute step, go back into their old positions, disturbed, troubled, and anxious—"lingering, shivering on the brink, and fear to launch

away." From all of these a demand is made from me—"Tell us of your life! How came you out of the circle which encompasses the Christian world, and what is the reason for the hope that is in you?" To this demand my present course of lectures is the response.

All our lives are rooted in the past, and are powerfully influenced by it. No doubt the individual self, the conscious, thinking personality, while influenced and moulded, also influences and moulds. There is action and re-action. Our surroundings limit and shape us; but the soul within us reads itself into them and makes them its picture galleries, its school, its outlook.

To find what a man is, and to estimate the sum of what he is, we have not only to see him as he stands before us to-day, and to interpret him by his capacity and work, but to get behind him to the circumstances of his life, and to trace the working of the things and persons that helped to make him what he is. And if we would realize how it is he stands so firmly, or treads so hesitatingly, we must travel the road he trod, and find out how he came to be where and what he is. No life has been developed by leaps and bounds, but by slow evolving process, which in orderly development has gradually opened out and helped to shape the life into what we see it is to-day.

So, no man who is widely separated in thought and aim from those around him gained his position by a sudden bound. There is no such breaking with the past. Only by slow degrees are the bonds relaxed. The light dawns slowly. The deviation at first is slight; but the logic of life is irresistible, and every new step forward is also a step farther apart.

It will be my aim to show how all this is illustrated in the steps of my religious life.

To get complete evidence of the workings of all the forces which help to mould and make any life would be impossible. We all spring out of a mighty past. The history of the world, in some degree, is written in the life of every man. All that has ever existed in the life of the world has exercised some influence upon every individual life of to-day. The life

of any soul is really but a phase of the life of humanity. From this point of view it will therefore be seen that no one can adequately portray his own or any other life. The theme is too vast; it reaches too far; its roots are too deep and wide.

In most cases we can do little more than go back to the beginning of the life of the individual, shew the surroundings at his most impressionable periods, and mark the growth of the man amid the outward changes of his personal career. No doubt this leaves much unaccounted for, and makes the picture present an unfinished appearance, though it may enable us to gain a rough and fairly reliable glimpse of the man as he really is.

In my own case, I must not even attempt to uplift the veil of a distant past, and shew how through successive generations the forces have been at work moulding and limiting, as well as inspiring, my personal life. It must be assumed that these forces have played their part, and that when I first saw the light of life, and gazed with curious eagerness upon the wonders around me, I represented a personality that had grown out of a boundless past, and that was looking with longing eyes towards an unknown future.

Like others I had to face life's issues, to find my own place, to pursue my own course, to fight my own battles, to secure my own foothold, to solve life's problems for myself, and to confront the calm forces of nature, and the omnipotence of God as best I could.

It is the story of this life, in relation to my present religious position and public teaching, that I propose now to unfold.

My first recollections take me back to a period of home-life which had both its sad and sunny sides. Much that belongs to that period, though of essential importance to me, and having much to do with certain phases of my career, cannot be told here. I must be eclectic. These things which most appear to me to belong to my religious growth and history must alone enlist attention. On these I will concentrate my thought.

Only dimly in the early past of my life can I see the face and catch the sound of the voice

of my father. And yet the influence of his life and work seems never to have left me. His personality was such that after death he lived with new life in his home and among his children. He was the son of a farmer, but he soon left the homestead and chose his own path of life in a large town. His career was chequered. A workman, a soldier serving in distant lands, again in civil pursuits, an athlete, a lively companion, a Sunday School teacher, a preacher, a worker for the good of man, one of the humble heroes of the world. This was the man. His varied career made his character and conversation picturesque; he was an agreeable and inspiring companion; his lively sallies of wit cheered every assembly where he was; and the intense earnestness of his religious life, after what he called "his conversion," was brightened by his gladness of nature, his hopeful outlook towards the future, and his absolute trust and confidence in God. Many stories are told of his influence over children, and how he gathered them out of the streets and alleys and in the school-room interested them in education and religion; and many a country congregation testified to the brightness of his presence, and his uplifting words. He belonged to the Methodist New Connexion. I have no data from which I can determine how far he had accepted or cared for any special theological system, but plenty by which I can discover his earnestness, his cheerfulness, his trust in God, his confidence in the nature of man, and his belief that the gospel of Christ was meant for the salvation of the world. I can but just remember him. Going out one Sunday to preach in one of the country congregations, he was thrown from his horse, and broke a blood-vessel. Though he lived for two years after this, he was never able to preach again. But his life was a cheerful sermon. He was always bright, and his words and presence always brought sunshine. He has always seemed to me more of an angel than a man, because I could hear so much about his character, and work, and influence, which were always of a nature that seemed to me to belong to the kingdom of God, while I could know so little of my own

personal knowledge of his life in this lower world. But it will readily be seen that his influence over me was great, and that it grew as my childhood developed into youth.

My mother was never tired of speaking of him. He was as much the head of the household after his death as he was before. He was always quoted. His example was continually held forth. What he would have done or said was influential in determining what we ought to do or say; and you may be sure that wherever we went—to school, to church, or to work—it was impressed upon us, that we should walk in his footsteps. And yet there was one element of divergence between my father and mother which soon made itself manifest to me. I have said that I have no data by which I can tell the precise theological position which my father occupied, but there was no doubt about his cheerfulness, his hopefulness, his belief in the impartial goodness of God, and his recognition of the relationship which all mankind bore to Him as His children. Here he and my mother parted company. How far the divergence existed while my father lived I cannot tell, but I became very sensible of it as I grew older, years after he had passed away. While he lived we all went to the Methodist Chapel, and indeed long after he died. But a darker tinge of thought was in my mother's mind. She had among her relatives and friends many who were rigid and stern Calvinists. The hard logic of their position soon left its influence upon her logical mind. She had within herself strong tendencies towards a belief in predestination; and as she listened to the conversations of her friends, who were in the grimmest earnest, and who seemed not to have the shadow of a doubt of their own election to grace, and to be assured of "the final perseverance of the saints," she soon was caught in a logical mesh from which she could not escape, though her woman's heart and her motherly love made many a hard struggle for a more cheerful faith. Most distinctly and painfully do I remember overhearing conversations among the little group of Calvinists, conversations wherein my mother was rather a listener than a talker, but a listener deeply

and painfully interested, in which it was laid down, with a sharp and precise force that made me shudder, that God had out of all eternity settled his plans and decrees, and unalterably determined before man was created who should be saved, and who should be damned; and that no effort which any man or all men could make would ever be able to change the condition of things which God had predestinated. The word predestination used to sound in my ears as a word of doom. A grim and relentless fate seemed to me to preside over the destinies of the world, and I felt that man was in the grip of a remorseless necessity which made him powerless as clay in the hands of a potter. This very figure of speech was in constant use among the earnest group of Calvinists; and when, at times, my mother, thinking of her children, or others concerned about the eternal welfare of those whom they loved, expressed a doubt, it was sternly asked—"Who art thou that repliest against thy Maker? Shall not God do as He pleases? Has He not power to make one vessel to honour, and another vessel to dishonour?" These terrible questions did not satisfy, but they silenced the objections. How could they doubt the *power* of God? And if God had so decided, how could they dare to question His decision? The poor human heart might beat its vain protest, and the cry of the anguished soul might be stifled by the overpowering mystery of the majesty and glory of God, but what was there to be done but to submit and lie down as the feet of fate trampled over them? Paul's 9th chapter to the Romans was the arsenal of these grim warriors of predestination. There was not one of them who could not quote it by heart; whether they knew what is called the "Lord's Prayer," or the "Shepherd's" Psalm, or the Parable of the Prodigal Son, I cannot tell. I never heard them speak of these, or allow themselves to be drawn aside from the grim triumphs of the predestined saint, or the awful punishment of the predestined damned by any such disturbing utterances as these. Again and again I heard the words—"He will have mercy on whom He will; and whom He will He hardeneth;" and when any protest was

raised, it was stopped by the tremendous words—"O man, who art thou that repliest against God? Shall the thing formed say to Him that formed it, Why hast thou made me thus?" At all the gatherings where I happened to be present—present as an unnoticed boy—I heard Gill's Commentaries referred to as the great authority. At that time I knew nothing of Gill; but he seemed to me to be not only a master in this little Israel, but of equal authority to any apostle of the New Testament. The law and the testimony were found in his pages. One little book by another writer was held in high repute. The little band of high Calvinists carried it in their pockets. It was a convenient text-book, and its sentences were quoted with sledge-hammer weight. I refer to Tucker on "Predestination." Any difficulty raised by some stray Arminian who now and then found his way among this group was promptly answered by Tucker. There was no difficulty in turning up the proper passage. These men and women had mastered their text-books, and were skilled controversialists. Sentiment, feeling, hope, supposition could not be tolerated even for a moment. Hardly could a momentary hearing be obtained for any purely human appeal, it was beating against the bars of fate, and fighting against the judge of all the earth. Tucker, or Gill, or Paul, slew all antagonists, and the meetings broke up with a stern triumph on the part of these champions of an awful necessity. I have heard them afterwards, as they sat at tea together, solemnly chuckle over the defeat of their adversaries, and exult in their triumph, as if they had vindicated the justice as well as the power of the Almighty.

But many a time did I watch the uneasy and troubled countenance of my mother. She was convinced, I knew; she could not escape from the conclusions that had been drawn, but she was heart-sore and distressed. Sometimes I thought she was wondering whether she was herself among the "saved," or whether the tremendous fate of "damnation" was reserved for her. But I soon discovered that her great trouble was about her children. She had had five. One had died as a babe. What of him? Was he among those who in the just counsels

of God had been foreappointed to salvation or damnation? Her heart was sorely troubled about her babe. She could not solve the problem. The babe was infinitely dear to her. It had been born when her husband's life was slowly ebbing away, and she loved it with an aching love. But what if that little one were in hell? The fear, the doubt was full of horror. And the children still left fatherless on her hands, for whom she had to work almost day and night to feed, and clothe, and educate. What of them? If this awful doctrine of predestination were true, and how could she doubt it, then what would be the fate of her dear ones? She might "work her fingers to the bones" to provide for their bodily wants; she might do her best to fit them to make their way in this world; but no working, no praying, no pleading with them or with God would exercise the slightest influence over their eternal destiny. She was ever ready to make sacrifices for her children, indeed her life had been absolutely consecrated to them; but of what avail were sacrifices? She might be ready to give her body to be burned for them; cheerfully go forth to meet any suffering; but no pangs suffered by her could make the slightest difference, or in any way alter the decrees of God. She often gazed at her children wistfully—hoping, fearing, confident, despairing about their prospects—and as often would turn sadly and hopelessly away, feeling that the problem of their destiny was insoluble by her.

It was as an onlooker upon this "Divine Tragedy" going on in my mother's home and heart that I first confronted this grim and ghastly doctrine of predestination. I saw the awful shadow it cast over the heart and life of a true, brave woman. I saw how it stood like a terrible spectre by board and bed through weary years. I saw the struggle going on between a mother's love, and a frightful dogma about God; and I found myself, even as a young boy, drawing closer to my mother's heart, and rebelling against the teaching of her head. Somehow I discovered myself enlisted against the groups of dogmatists who could talk so confidently about "God's ways, and God's decrees," and though I could not answer them, and felt unequal to the task of grappling with them and Paul, and Gill, and Tucker, yet I resolutely took my place as one who not only doubted, but absolutely repudiated all for which they contended. I did not doubt their earnestness and sincerity; no one who knew them *could* doubt; but I felt that they were grievously and horribly wrong, and that the love of a woman's heart was worth a thousand-fold more than all their creeds. The fire of youth was all ablaze within me against this doctrine of predestination. I could not, I would not believe that God had made us all to live forever in either heaven or hell, and

then had given us no chance of making a choice between the two. It looked like such a tremendous mockery, such a ghastly caricature of what is right and just, that I stood out, even if I stood alone, and cast it from me as unworthy, not simply of credence, but even of a moment's consideration. I could not tell where the chain of reasoning was at fault; my heart, more than my head, was in revolt, and I rejected the dogma, notwithstanding my respect for the grave men and women and the high authorities by whom they were supported, who formed the high court of religion in the little circle wherein I lived.

I do not know that at this time I had any very definite idea as to what I really meant when I used the word God; but I do know that there was something in my daily prayer, learnt from my mother's lips, "Our Father, who art in heaven," which would not fit in with the notion of one who was so unjust, as it appeared to me, as to create people only to torture them for ever. This was no "Father," and this was no "God." I could not have reasoned with the men and women who were about me, but no amount of reasoning of theirs could in any way make me believe as they believed. It was the revolt of a child's heart against the dogmas of men's heads. I heard all that was said about foreknowledge, and how foreknowledge involved foreordination, and I felt myself in a sort of logical puzzle, struggling with a riddle that I could not guess; but the riddle of my head never troubled my heart. Somehow I felt awestruck when great names were quoted in defence and justification of the terrible dogma, and I did not hesitate to think that they taught what the good men and women about me believed that they taught; but no respect for them in any way moved me, nor in the slightest degree shook the confidence of my heart. Perhaps they might be right—but I also was right. I could not shake their position or dispute with them, but I myself was as immovable as the everlasting hills. Looking back now upon this strong attitude of the boy, and remembering how I felt while I saw the puzzle of the problem, I cannot but feel that the child was nearer the truth than the full-grown men. He could not see his way, and yet in some artless way rested in certain hope that all would end well for those who tried to do their best; while they saw clearly that the problem was distinctly solved, and that God made vessels of honour, and vessels of dishonour all for His own glory.

The child's revolt, upspringing from a loving heart, has been sustained by the man's intellect. The riddle of the age is perhaps not yet solved, and men will still argue as to foreknowledge and predestination, but on the whole, the tendency is growing among men to believe that we are not left without a chance, but that we may pick our steps over the meshes and snares

of sin, and find a safeway for ourselves into the kingdom of God. At all events I date my repudiation of the dogma of predestination from my observation of the men and women who so ardently believed it, and especially from my sympathy with the struggle I witnessed in my mother's nature against her own strong belief in the dogma which her heart would fain have warmly repudiated. I stood out then against those I thought to be the wise and good of the earth, and I unhesitatingly cast aside, with a child's deep indignation, what people older and wiser than I felt to be the very truth of God. Since then I have never been haunted with the ghosts of terrible thoughts about my doom being fixed for me before I was born. I have felt myself to be a free agent. I have found that I could move according to my will, and the more I have felt my freedom, the better has been my comprehension of God and of His dealings with the children of men.

That a powerful restraining influence was working within me and above me I never doubted, and that in some wondrous manner, though I should have my way and walk as I chose, while in the end God would have His way, and bring me to Himself, I also never doubted; but this belief helped me, not only to escape from the dogma of a dreadful predestination, but also, as I shall hereafter set forth, from other appalling beliefs which have so long held many hearts in bondage, and darkened their outlook not only in this life, but especially as they looked towards the dreadful and unknown future. I have reason to thank God that in my early youth, and from amid the sanctities of home, I made my escape from the prison-house of a fatalistic creed, and found my way into a larger liberty and a nobler life.

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